

Capturing Control of Comma Calamity

Do you avoid commas like the plague? You're never sure where to put them, so you opt not to use them. In the end, your writing seems to run together and readers have a hard time following it.

Or do you have the opposite problem?

Do you consider commas the greatest invention since sliced bread? You happily add them anywhere and everywhere, hoping the more you use, the clearer your writing will be. In the end, your writing has so many that it seems choppy and readers feel like they're in an unending series of starting and stopping.

Or are you somewhere in between?

Do you have only vague recollections of comma rules? You haphazardly place them here and there hoping some of them will get lucky and lend clarity to your writing. In the end, your commas can't be trusted and leave readers frustrated.

If commas are supposed to be so helpful, why are they so hard to use correctly? Before we address some basic comma writing rules, let's make sure you understand some terms in those rules.

phrase – a group of related words *missing* a subject, predicate (verb + object) or both that cannot stand alone as a sentence.

guards the house (predicate)
the ancient oak tree (subject)
with crooked old limbs (neither)

Phrases cannot stand alone as a sentence, BUT a sentence can be made from only phrases: *The ancient oak tree with crooked limbs guards the house.*

clause – a group of related words that has both a **subject** and a **verb**

a whole chain of plants and animals is affected
when one species dies out completely

independent clause – presents a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence

The ancient oak tree guards the house.
A whole chain of plants and animals is affected.

dependent clause – a clause that does not present a complete thought and cannot stand alone as a sentence because it depends on an independent clause

When one species dies out completely, a whole chain of plants and animals is affected.

Some Basic Comma Rules to Remember:

1. Use commas to separate items in a series/list of 3 or more words, phrases or clauses.

I need to buy eggs, milk, cookies, and rice.

Joe plays soccer in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the summer.

You should brush your teeth when you wake up, after you eat, and before you go to bed.

NOTE: The last comma in the series is optional ONLY if your writing remains clear. If you have a long or complex list, use the last comma. Remember, if you're unsure, it's always correct to use it!

2. Use a comma to separate 2 independent clauses joined by

for	and	nor	but	or	yet	so*
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*when *so* means *as a result*

Jenny wants to help feed the poor, **so** she is planning on going to Africa this summer.

The doctor would like to see you, **but** he has been at the hospital all day.

When the 2 independent clauses are very short, some people don't use commas. However, if you use a comma, it is still okay.

Joseph likes cheesecake, **but** Carol likes chocolate cake.

Joseph likes cheesecake **but** Carol likes chocolate cake.

3. If there are two or more equal adjectives in a row.

Tim is a handsome, smart man.

NOTE: Do NOT use a comma if the adjectives express a single idea. To decide whether to use a comma, try reading the adjectives with 'and' or reverse the adjectives. If the sentence sounds awkward, do NOT use a comma.

4. Use a comma after introductory words, phrases and clauses that come at the beginning of a sentence.

- a. Introductory Word: Oh, I need a sharper pencil.

Some common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include *yes/no, however, well, unfortunately, sorry, therefore, consequently, and other transition words*.

- b. Introductory Phrase: During the long meeting, he fell asleep.

- c. Introductory Clause: After the game ended, we went for pizza.

Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include *after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while*.

5. Use a comma to separate interrupters.

Interrupters – words that break up a sentence and add emphasis.

You know, *of course*, the purpose of this meeting.

6. Use a comma to separate unnecessary or nonessential appositives in a sentence.

Appositive – words that add information about the noun that directly precedes it. **Use commas ONLY if it is NOT necessary to identify the noun.**

Our principal, *Mr. Souza*, will present the award. (His name is not necessary because the principal is still presenting the award no matter what his name is.)

The president of the company, *who is a Harvard graduate*, plans on retiring at the end of the month. (It doesn't matter where he went to school. He's still the president who is retiring.)

The documentary *Space Exploration* won an award. (The name of the documentary is necessary to know which documentary won.)

7. Use commas to separate an explanatory phrase from the rest of the sentence.

English, *the language computers speak worldwide*, is also the most widely used language in science and medicine.

8. Use commas before a direct quote. (Want more information about quotations and quotation marks? Go to "Dialogue" in Mrs. Swanda's Writing Resource Wiki.)

Mark said, "I loved visiting China and Korea."

9. Use a comma to set off a distinct shift.

Puppies are very cute, but messy.

10. And because I'm tired of seeing it, do NOT use a comma BEFORE a 'because' phrase or clause if the meaning doesn't change, which is almost all the time!

It seems that it will snow today because of the cold weather and red sky.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIBfnqgnhzw&feature=related> (let's eat grandpa)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAb3WpMELZ0&feature=related> (comma song)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN-Z8XFjDFs> (electric company)

Practice Time

Directions: Put commas in the sentences below.

1. My best friend who comes from Egypt is a very nice guy.
2. Even if it takes all day I am going to fix the roof.
3. Japanese food is healthy light and not very oily.
4. There was fear that another big war would start so the United Nations was formed.
5. I want to go swimming today because it's so hot.
6. When you meet people for the first time never talk about religion politics and a bad boss.
7. Jim wants to see a movie but Carol wants to stay home.
8. Sam please hand me the ice cream cone.
9. I need to visit my mother wash my car and buy six stamps.
10. Terry is working on a project and he should be finished with it next week.
11. Until I reach my goal I will not stop working.
12. Because she is only twelve she is not old enough to drive.
13. The car a 1967 ford mustang is very fast.
14. They were so excited because their team won the soccer tournament.
15. "If I don't wake up in time" he whispered "I will be in trouble."
16. Sorry we do not have enough room.
17. Gold watches for example are going on sale today.
18. We can go to the zoo or we can go to the movie theater.
19. Wait is there another way?
20. We have a lively fun class.

Practice Time Answers

Directions: Put commas in the sentences below. (Commas go after the highlighted words.)

1. My best friend, who comes from Egypt, is a very nice guy.
2. Even if it takes all day, I am going to fix the roof.
3. Japanese food is healthy, light, and not very oily. (Last comma optional)
4. There was fear that another big war would start, so the United Nations was formed.
5. I want to go swimming today because it's so hot. (no commas)
6. When you meet people for the first time, never talk about religion, politics, and a bad boss.
7. Jim wants to see a movie, but Carol wants to stay home.
8. Sam, please hand me the ice cream cone.
9. I need to visit my mother, wash my car, and buy six stamps.
10. Terry is working on a project, and he should be finished with it next week.
11. Until I reach my goal, I will not stop working.
12. Because she is only twelve, she is not old enough to drive.
13. The car, a 1967 Ford Mustang, is very fast.
14. They were so excited because their team won the soccer tournament.
15. "If I don't wake up in time," he whispered, "I will be in trouble."
16. Sorry, we do not have enough room.
17. Gold watches, for example, are going on sale today.
18. We can go to the zoo, or we can go to the movie theater. (optional)
19. Wait, is there another way?
20. We have a lively, fun class.

Comma Resources:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>

<http://www.myenglishteacher.net/usingcommas.html>

Kemper, Dave, Sebranek, Patrick, and Meyer, Verne. Write Source: a Book for Writing, Thinking and Learning. Houghton Mifflin Co., c2005.

<http://en.allexperts.com/q/Language-Arts-Kids-3249/punctuation.htm>